The Risky Business of Preaching and Listening to Sermons
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"Eutychus, who was sitting in the window, began to sink into a deep sleep while Paul talked still longer."
Acts 20:9 (NRSV)

Startle us, O God, with your truth. Open our minds and out hearts to your word: that hearing we may believe; and believing, trust you with our lives. Amen.

Time for the sermon. It was a nervous and turbulent sermon, with a bumpy landing due to the loss of one engine, but afterward people shook his hand and said it was one of the finest they ever heard. He thought, "You've got to be kidding," but the Lutherans of Lake Wobegon don't use much irony, like they don't use much curry powder. . . . Blushing, he thought, "Thank you, Lord, very much."

Garrison Keillor
Life among the Lutherans

My favorite story about what happens when the preacher goes on too long takes place in a Puritan congregation in New England. Puritanism's purpose was to purify and simplify the highly structured and elaborate liturgies of the Church of England. The focus of a Puritan worship service was the spoken word, the sermon. Puritan preachers delivered long sermons. So long that a deacon was appointed to make sure everyone paid attention. If a head began to nod, the deacon went into action: with a long pole equipped with a hardwood ball on the end, he prodded the drowsy worshiper awake. An elderly gentleman had nodded off. The deacon tapped him on the shoulder with the pole; the gentleman snapped awake, straightened up, only to have sleep return a few minutes later. The process was repeated several times. Now he is deeply asleep and snoring, everyone knows it, even the preacher, who continues preaching undaunted. The dear man is so deeply asleep that the gentle prodding by the deacon has no effect. The situation is serious. More aggressive measures are required. The deacon hits the man on the head, sharply. The man rouses from his sleep and says, loud enough for all to hear, "Hit me again. He's still talking."

It is an inside joke, and we are all in on it. Every preacher has looked out and seen it: that overwhelming sleepiness, that heroic struggle, the eyelids

drooping, head tilting forward, then jerking awake and desperately hoping no one has noticed. I have never been critical or offended by it, because I have been there many times. One o'clock classes used to be my downfall; afternoon lectures or long meetings after lunch are still precarious for me. So I am never critical. In fact, if you are so inclined, be comfortable; know that this preacher understands. Have a little nap.

My favorite memory of a sermon going on too long comes from my own childhood, sitting between my parents in our pew, desperately fighting boredom by counting the panels in the chancel rail, the fleur de lis design in the wallpaper, wondering if the sermon would ever end. When the Reverend Mr. Graham, whom I grew to respect and admire later, went on past my father's endurance level, he did the most wonderful thing: pulled out his big railroad watch from his vest pocket and proceeded to wind it. In the somber silence of the sanctuary, it was unmistakable and loud. People all around us could hear it. Mother was mortified; glared at him. I loved it. I always wondered whether Reverend Graham heard it, because it always seemed to me that he wound up his sermon shortly after Dad wound his watch.

In the 20th chapter of The Acts of the Apostles there is a story about a young boy and a sermon that went on far too long. It's such a peculiar story that it isn't in the lectionary. New Testament scholars have mostly ignored it.

It is a wonderful story, told without embellishment. The Apostle Paul, Christianity's first preacher, evangelist, and working theologian, traveled from one end of the Roman Empire to the other in the years following the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ, telling the story of Jesus, first in synagogues, and then on street corners and in the small communities of believers who had begun to gather regularly, to talk about their new beliefs, to pray together, to eat a meal together to remember Jesus as he had instructed, and generally to hold on to one another for comfort and encouragement in a world that did not know what to make of them and would soon turn against them. They had begun to take his name for themselves, called themselves Christians, and together they were his ecclesia—his community, his family, the church. They began by meeting together in local synagogues on the Jewish sabbath. But as Gentiles started to show up and become believers, the Christians gradually pulled away from the synagogue and started to meet on their own. They chose the first day of the week, Sunday, resurrection day. Because it was a work day, their meetings took place in the evening, in one of their homes.

A pattern for early Christian worship began to emerge: scripture was read from what we call the Old Testament, perhaps interpreted by one of them. If there was a letter from Paul, or from one of the other churches, it was read and discussed. They sang hymns from the psalms, prayed, ate a meal together—a real meal—and they repeated the words he said at his last meal

with his disciples, “Eat this bread, drink this wine, in remembrance of me,” and went back into the night to their homes, back into the world to love and serve as he told them to do.

Paul is visiting one of these small communities of believers in the city of Troas, a port city on the coast of modern Turkey. It’s a quick trip. He’s leaving in the morning by ship.

It’s the first day of the week, evening. The believers have gathered to break bread, and Paul was preaching. He has a lot to say. Because he is leaving in the morning and may never see the good people of Troas again, he goes on and on until midnight. I’ve always wondered what he said: Was it doctrine, explaining emerging Christian ideas and concepts? Was it an ethical discussion? Did he talk about how believers in Jesus should live in the world? Was it pastoral? Did he offer assurance and comfort to those who were hurting, worried, grieving? Since it went on for hours, it must have been all of that and more.

The meeting was in a room on the third story of the building. There were many lamps. It was very hot in that room. A young man, Eutychus was his name, decided to sit in the window to catch whatever cool breeze there was. We don’t know how old he was, but “young man” probably means sixteen, seventeen, eighteen—about the age I found that I could not stay awake during a lecture after lunch. Eutychus became sleepy: the suffocating heat, the endless talk droning on and on. He begins to nod off, and Paul keeps on talking. Finally, Eutychus’s sleep overcomes him, and he falls out the window, three stories to the street below. It must have been horrible. Surely the young man was dead. Paul stops talking, runs down the stairs, everyone follows him, finds the young man lying motionless, unconscious, leans down, kneels beside him, takes him in his arms, cradles him—it is a very tender gesture—holds the boy in his own strong arms, and thanks be to God, sees and feels that he is breathing; he is not dead. The crusty old Pharisee, combative scholar, world traveler who couldn’t stop talking about Jesus, softens, becomes a kind pastor: “Do not be alarmed,” he says. “His life is still in him.”

And then they all go back upstairs and have their meal, finally. His relieved and very grateful parents take Eutychus home with them. They are, they all are, “no little comforted.” And Paul—Paul takes up where he left off and goes right on taking until dawn.

Preaching and listening to sermons can be risky business. The first time Jesus tried it, it almost got him killed. He began his public ministry by returning to Nazareth, where he grew up, where he was known, to the synagogue where he sat with his father and learned to read and recite and sing the psalms. They knew Jesus there, and they were proud of his learning

and erudition, and so he was invited to be the reader. He turned to his favorite passage in the book of the prophet Isaiah:

> The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
> because he has anointed me
> to bring good news to the poor.
> He has sent me to proclaim
> release to the captives
> and recovering of sight to the blind,
> to let the oppressed go free,
> to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

"Isn't that nice," they said. They loved that passage: the messiah will come some day and do all those wonderful things. It was a good day in the Nazareth synagogue. But when Jesus sat down and began to interpret that passage, when it became clear that he regarded these ancient words as his personal mission statement, his job description, the mood changed. "Who does he think he is?" The more he talked, now criticizing them, the more angry they became—so angry that they drive him out of town and almost throw him over the cliff. Preaching sermons, as well as listening to sermons, can be risky business.

At the heart of the early Christian movement, the earliest Christian church, there is this particular and peculiar practice: The community gathers. One reads and speaks and something happens, something beyond explaining and understanding sometimes. The words become the Word of God. The words of one, offered to the community, become the vehicle by which the community is addressed; the individual members, wherever they are, whatever is happening in their lives, are addressed by God.

We call it the theology of the Word, and it is not about the particular skills or absence of skills of the preacher. It is about God, God the communicator. "In the beginning was the Word: the Word was with God; the Word was God"—the Logos in Greek, the very nature and essence of God, to communicate: to speak, to be known, to be in communication, in relationship with the creation and every creature. It is what we believe basically about God. God is a communicator—not remote, mysteriously silent, but God who speaks, addresses us.

Words are powerful. Helen Keller, who lost her sight and hearing in early childhood, locked in absolute isolation, said that "she had no world until a first word was grasped" (David Buttrick, *Homiletic,* p. 7). When God speaks, creation happens. "Let there be light," God says, and there is light. God speaks a word and a people is formed. God speaks and invites people to live in covenantal relationship with God and with one another. When they forget

who they are, whose they are, God speaks through prophets, individuals possessed by God. “Thus says the Lord,” they declare.

The Word—God’s essential, communicative, loving, relating self—became flesh, we believe, became Jesus, who is the Word of God.

God continues to speak—in the beauty and power of creation, in the light that comes every morning with the stunning sunrise, with the gentle beauty of a summer garden, the fertility of the earth, the power of mountains and storms. God speaks in history, in the world, in life in the world. God’s word is spoken, we believe, through the words and art and music and literature and poetry of humankind.

God speaks in the words of scripture, words written by human beings but words, which by the power of the Holy Spirit, contain and become God’s word to us. And God, we believe, does speak when one stands up in the midst of the community to preach. It’s there from the earliest days of the church. The spoken word, preaching, has been overshadowed sometimes in history by liturgy and ritual. The Protestant Reformation, particularly, recovered the theology of the Word and the regular practice of preaching. Martin Luther and John Calvin were intellectual giants who wrote profound philosophical theology. And they were weekly preachers; in Calvin’s case, daily.

But the very heart of it is not the skill of the preacher but our trust that for some mysterious reason God uses this act to address the community and individuals in it. Every one of us who does this has learned and been humbled by the reality that there is more going on than our words.

I don’t know how Garrison Keillor knows this, but he does. Pastor Ingqvist, the harried, overworked, and underpaid Lutheran minister in Keillor’s fictional Lake Wobegon, has had a bad week and has not prepared very thoroughly and is not at all satisfied with his sermon. He hasn’t even written a conclusion. To his chagrin, the church is packed. He delivers what he knows is a poor, inadequate effort, “a nervous and turbulent sermon with a bumpy landing due to the loss of one engine.” Afterward his people tell him it was a fine sermon, one of his finest, which he knows is not true, unless there is something more going on here beyond his own poor effort, which is exactly what we believe and the only reason we have the nerve to do it, week after week after week. It is not entertainment; it is not educational. It may be both, but we do it because of the hope, the confidence, that God uses this exercise to speak to, challenge, comfort, to announce good news.

As they compliment him on his poor sermon, Pastor Ingqvist at first thinks, “You have got to be kidding,” but realizing Lutherans don’t use much irony, like they don’t use curry powder, he whispers a prayer preachers know very

well: “Thank you, Lord. Thank you very much” (*Life among the Lutherans*, p. 47).

It occurred to me, that what this little vignette really is about is not Paul preaching all night and a sleepy young man falling out of the window (even though I have built a sermon on it). I think what this little story is all about is that tender gesture of holding the young man, reassuring the community that he was not dead, reassuring the community that there was nothing to fear, not the prospect of death, not the reality of death itself. It occurred to me that what Paul did, in the middle of his interrupted sermon, is what his sermon was about, what every sermon is about finally, is what church is about, what church is supposed to be: the place where the wounded and hurting and frightened and dying are held and where in a frightening world we hear that there is no reason to be afraid. The community was “not a little comforted,” the account says.

John Ruskin once famously said that in a sermon the preacher has 30 minutes to raise the dead, which is also, I believe, the church’s job, is, as Jesus one time told his disciples, to raise the dead, to bring God’s love to every deadly life situation—the threat of disease, the reality of aging, the deterioration of a relationship, the end of secure employment—to hold in our arms hurting ones and to hear again good news that there is no reason, ultimately, to be alarmed, to be afraid.

I’m retired, so not preaching regularly. A while ago I attended the funeral of a member of the congregation, an elder who battled one debilitating health crisis after another for four years, who never gave up, and even though he had no family at all was never alone because of the community, which would not leave him alone, which held him literally in its arms. Pastors led the service, read scripture, one preached the homily. As I sat in the pew, one of the community, I thought about this mystery: this faith of ours that does not flinch in the face of death; this precious community of ours that holds the hurting, suffering, forgotten, and dying in its arms. I thought about all the words spoken over the years and decades, words which somehow, by the grace of God, became on occasion the Word of God.

I was no little comforted by that, and I borrowed Pastor Ingquist’s words:

Thank you, Lord. Thank you very much.

Amen.